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First victims identified by DNA testing

Fears that many dead 'no longer exist in any form'

Michael Ellison *in New York*

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Officials hoped yesterday that they were approaching a final figure for the mathematics of suffering when it was disclosed that the first victims of the attacks on the World Trade Centre had been identified by DNA testing.

"I think we're in the ballpark," said Charles Campisi, the New York police chief who heads the unit which is identifying the missing. "The list is in a state of flux and will continue to be."

At first it was feared that perhaps 10,000 people had been killed on September 11 in the complex where up to 50,000 worked in lower Manhattan. Now that has been revised to 4,964 dead or missing, and the figure may end up lower than that.

The husband of Marion DeBlase was one of the eight so far identified solely on the basis of DNA testing. "You have to come to some kind of closure somehow as each day goes by but it's very difficult to come to terms with it when you have nothing to hold on to," Mrs DeBlase, 42, said.

Her husband James, a 45-year-old bond broker, was identified after she produced his hair follicles and tooth brushes along with cheek swabs from their three sons to be compared with samples recovered from the site of the attacks and sifted on Staten Island.

Mr DeBlase worked for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 105th floor of the 110-storey north tower and was one of 700 employees the firm lost.

"I assume that this is a very tedious and lengthy job, especially if they're not finding whole persons," said Mrs DeBlase. "I would love to think that I would have something, but it's horrible to think that's the point we have come to."

Rudy Giuliani, the New York mayor, has said that the family of each victim will receive a wooden urn containing dust and debris from the site.

Six weeks after the attacks, the remains of only 425 people have been identified. Those of hundreds more arrive each day at the New York City chief medical examiner's offices, each in a separate numbered bag. DNA tests are run when dentals records, fingerprints and scars on the bodies are unavailable or cannot be matched.

Mr Giuliani asked more victims' families to provide DNA. "We've got 2,600 samples but we know that the numbers of people missing are closer to 5,000 so there are many more people that could submit DNA samples if that's what they wanted to do," he said.

Few bodies have been found intact and Charles Hirsch, the chief medical examiner, said: "As time passes, in the not too distant future I expect that DNA identifications will dominate in the process that we're involved in." But he acknowledged that it might be impossible ever to identify some bodies. "How many people no longer exist in any form I have no way of knowing." About 8,000 body parts are thought to have been recovered.

The number of people missing has oscillated because lists were provided by about 12 sources, including families, companies, the Red Cross, the police and consulates for 62 countries. For instance, on September 20 the number was thought to be 5,422; three days later it had grown to 6,453.

Reasons for the discrepancies include overlapping lists and families failing to notify police when people reported as missing eventually turned up. One country believed initially that 400 of its citizens were missing whereas its toll is now thought to be just over 100. Up to 200 Britons were feared dead after the British consulate in New York and the Foreign Office in London received more than 25,000 calls. The true number is now considered to be closer to 100.

Mr Campisi said that the missing persons unit was reluctant to say for sure that someone was dead until everything possible had been done to establish the facts.

"You get different spellings, different date of births," he said. "You don't want to definitely say that this person is not missing or that these two are the same person. There's a lot of legwork that goes on."

One of the relatively few people to be treated in hospital after the World Trade Centre attacks - most were simply dead or alive - has died, 41 days after the atrocity. Jennieann Maffeo, 42, a senior associate at UBS PaineWebber, had been thought unlikely to live for more than 36 hours after receiving burns to 90% of her body.